

The Channel Islands, Southern California

great boat diving for \$100/day with room and board

I awoke in my bunk rocking from side to side. Somehow I'd slept through the 6 a.m. flurry of activity as most other divers climbed aboard and set up their gear. I'd missed the Captain's initial loudspeaker announcements, missed the engines firing, and even missed our ten-minute trip through Ventura harbor. Now we were in the channel headed 14 miles into the Pacific toward the Anacapa Islands. Rolling out of my warm cocoon I grabbed my dry bag and headed up the stairs to the main deck where divers were drinking coffee, swapping lies, and setting up their gear. Since I'd set up the night before I had nothing better to do than dig into the continental breakfast laid out in the main cabin.

Ninety minutes later we were anchored off the west end of Anacapa, gates were open, and I jumped into the 53-degree water. Visibility ran 45 feet and I powered down along the anchor line through a thick school of indigo-blue blacksmiths in tight formation. On the 60-foot bottom, maroon spiny urchins pushed against the standard black spiked devils, and, with beautiful blue urchins, covered the volcanic rocky substrate. Half a dozen iridescent orange Garibaldi nibbling on algae chased each other away from their territories. Climbing onboard after 55 minutes, I babbled about the horn shark near the anchor, the 30-inch lingcod, the huge schools of golden senorita, and the juvenile sheepshead lazing about. Talking with veterans, I identified the fat slug-like sea hare and Spanish shawls, which are brilliant blue and orange nudibranchs. Other divers raved about the platter-sized electric ray they'd scared off the bottom. Hunter/gatherers had harvested both scallops and lobster. "Ah yes," I said, as I dipped water out of the hot tub and poured it down my 6mm suit, "this is going to be a great week of diving."

I'd flown from the East Coast into LA and rented a car. The drive to Ventura Harbor took nearly three hours, with all the stop-and-go follies on I405. The harbor/marina itself is an eclectic mix of long liners, squid boats, and other working vessels, along with an array of pricey pleasure craft. Three individually owned dive

boats call this home port; I lived on and dived from two, the 65-foot *Peace*, owned by Eric Bowman, and the 85-foot *Spectre*, skippered by Ted Cumming. The third boat, *Liberty*, had pulled itself out of the dive market to offer day-long whale watching tours. A couple of e-mails and a phone call or two and I booked the *Peace* for my first day and the *Spectre* for the remainder of my trip.

Each vessel runs 4-dive single day trips, three-quarter day three-tank

The Truth About San Salvador's Algae

In our review of San Salvador Island, we noted that the reefs were covered with algae, which made them drab and uninteresting. We offered some scientific speculation about the cause, but long time dive manager Chris McLaughlin wrote to set me straight:

Thank you for your June 2001 story. I believe that you were accurate and fair; though we are actually 400 miles southeast of Miami. Algae-covered reefs are a long time phenomenon on San Salvador. When I first came here in 1975 there was a lot of algae already. It is more widespread here than most Bahamian Islands. The Bahamian field station thinks it is possibly caused by deep water upwelling of Amazon River effluent, brought up by oceanic currents. From December to mid-April, winter storms clean all the fluffy algae from the reef. After the last big storm front of the season this nasty stuff starts growing fast and covers the reefs until October/November, when the first cold front storms blow it off again. Unfortunately, there is less coral left each time. Hurricane Floyd acted like a cold front and cleaned off the algae for a couple of weeks in the summer. So, your theory doesn't explain the steady increase of algae for 26 observed years, with hurricanes only in 1996 and 1999.

trips, overnights, multi-day charters, and specialty free diving and hunting trips. On the three-quarter day trips (\$65), they include breakfast, lunch, and air fills. On the 4-dive days (\$70), food and air fills are additional, and you pay to rent tanks and weights. For downright cheap multi-day diving you can mix and match the trips on the various boats and sleep aboard at no extra charge. That's right, no motel bill!

As one might expect, there are trade-offs. This isn't Peter Hughes level of luxury. California dive boats are sturdy, practical vessels, built to run year-round far offshore in rough seas. The main salons have an air of 'crew boat' practicality and are outfitted with vinyl-covered bench and table seating designed for dripping divers who wear their wetsuits all day. Sleeping accommodations consist of below-deck bunk rooms with an assortment of double and single berths that vary from vessel to vessel. (While the boats sleep 30-40 people, there were never more than a dozen staying all night in the harbor.) Curtains provide privacy, fans keep the air moving. If you don't like hearing your neighbors snore, bring earplugs. On open boat non-chartered trips such as mine, bed assignments were on a first come, first claimed basis. I managed to snag a double bunk each night, but on sold out trips, late arrivals could get caught bunkless. The heavy cloth or vinyl-covered foam mattresses were comfortable and both boats supplied blankets and pillows. If you want sheets, a sleeping bag or a towel, bring them.



\$5,000 Reward For Errant Spearfisherman

The owner of Body Glove, a major wetsuit manufacturer, has posted a \$5,000 reward to catch a California poacher who speared a 350-pound giant sea bass that may be a century old. Bob Meistrell put up the money when he got word that the protected, friendly giant was spotted off Santa

Catalina Island in mid-June on the shoreward side of the island. Later, another diver pulled out the spear, and then another diver reported that the wound was healing.

Overfishing led the number of the giant sea basses to plummet until they became protected in 1982. The population is bouncing back, much to the delight of divers who can often get a close-up look. "They've become like puppy dogs," said Meistrell. "They swim right up to you. People pet em."

Harming the fish is a misdemeanor that carries a maximum sentence of six months in jail, a \$2,000 fine and the seizure of the marine equipment used in the crime.

Meistrell said he and his twin brother each speared a giant sea bass in Mexico in the 1950s, when doing so was legal. "We were young and stupid," he said. His attitude has changed markedly since then. Recently he saw a man diving with his son who illegally speared a lobster. Not only was the catch out of season, but it was laden with tens of thousands of eggs. After Meistrell told him the error of his ways the spearfisherman apologized and said, "I'm glad you stayed calm." Meistrell replied, "You were lucky I didn't have a spear gun."

—Leon Drouin Keith, Associated Press

Each boat had hot water showers built into the main-deck unisex heads. The *Peace* had an additional open air shower on the dive deck, the *Spectre* had a below-deck shower and toilet and more room in the on dive deck units. Both boats had laundry facilities below deck. Because I'd be sleeping in port each night, I took the minimum and changed towels and clothes from my car trunk. Storage space is at a premium, so pack light in soft-sided bags.

The open-air dive deck, a third of the length of each boat, had gear racks along the sides and down the middle on the *Spectre*. Air-fill whips poking out of each rack allowed for quick fills as divers came aboard and tagged their tanks. The *Spectre* had more spacious gear stations but pumped only air. The *Peace* was a little tighter but pumped free Nitrox. They gave

detailed briefings with discussions of how the current was running, and how to best dive the site. Entry was via a giant stride off the sides. Exiting divers passed up cameras, spears, and game bags, then flopped on the full width swim platforms where crew members pulled off your fins. Then, with the rest of my gear still strapped on, I climbed one of the two ladders to the dive deck and waddled to my station. Both boats had attentive crews, with someone always specifically watching for divers, while others were there to help you exit. No one logged divers' depth or time. No site was deeper than 70 feet or so.

Chapbook 2002 Deadline

To have your report included in the 2002 *Chapbook*, we'll need to receive it by September 10. You can submit it online at: www.undercurrent.org

To keep the divers fueled, the cooks piled the plates with kilo-calories. The *Peace* gets my nod for a better meal. Their cook laid out greater selections for breakfast: fruits, cold cereal, bagels, English muffins, and lunch was a giant Mexican spread with beans, rice, tortillas, fajitas, guacamole, and salads. The *Spectre* was like an American-style luncheonette, with ala-carte items from their menu if you let the cook know early; otherwise you got the special of the day. I feasted on their Egg-McDiver breakfast sandwiches and enjoyed both the chicken plate lunch and the barbecue platter, which included rice, fresh garden and pasta salads, bread, and a drink. The *Spectre* sells beer on the ride home, the *Peace* is BYOB.

Hanging out at the docks in the evenings wasn't as boring as I imagined. The attractive marina had an interesting mix of clubs, shops, and restaurants, and a convenience market. The dive shop, which supplies the boats with tanks and rental gear, was well-stocked and reasonably priced, and provided me with hours of good camaraderie and impulse buying. Each evening I'd wander over to the adjacent surfing beach and sit on the driftwood to watch the sunset. Then, back to the marina for dinner. My favorite restaurants were Spinnaker Seafood and Frullati's where I hung out for hours listening to an incredible blue grass band one night and fine classical guitar the other.

The Peace and The Spectre

Diving for Experienced	★★★★
Diving for Beginners	★★★
Service & Attitude	★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

(Caribbean scale)

Nevertheless, I came for the diving, which pleasantly surprised me. Water temps in early March were between 51°-55° (it can near 70° in the summer). Air got up to 70° with alternately sunny and overcast days. Seas varied from flat to 4 to 5-foot rollers, with visibility from 30 to 50 feet.

Although these conditions pale when compared to warm water Caribbean diving, the shear density of the biomass more than makes up for any times that I got chilly.

At Santa Cruz, at "Little Scorpion," I played tag in the kelp forest with a pair of friendly California sea lions. Monstrous spider crabs wandering the bottom attacked my camera when I got close to take their portrait. At "Lobster Spot," dozens of horn sharks plied the bottom. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a large white flash and turned to catch a harbor seal dart into a cave cut into the shear rock. Waiting him out at the entrance, he rewarded me with pudgy-faced close-ups. After heading to the surface for air, he returned to look me over again.

On the protected marine reserve on the north side of East Anacapa, I saw large

gamefish that wouldn't be around for long on unprotected sites. Big sheepshead proudly sported their signature red stripes, while schooling perch and opaleye cruised the top 20 feet of the kelp. Three-pound lobsters pushed and nudged each other, jostling for a better position in their holes. Even an amateur like me could find palm-sized scallops. At "Landing Cove" a big green moray shot across a sand patch and scared up a halibut. Later, I entered a cave at the base of the lighthouse to see walls covered in red rock shrimp and the floor littered in lobster. On West Anacapa "Cat Rock," hairy-legged orange and yellow brittle stars covered a landscape broken only by multi-hued anemones, giant blue sea stars, and foot-long green sea cucumbers.

Yet my favorite denizens of California waters were the fields of kelp, replete with the feisty Garibaldi. Although much of the kelp around the Channel Islands died during the last El Niño, several sites held large forests of fronds. At "Underwater Island," dozens of bright orange Garibaldi raced back and forth, sometimes hiding, sometimes aggressively chasing me off. Shaking and shivering after 61 minutes, I lumbered aboard and heard the captain announce, "Gray whale dead ahead off the bow." As usual I was out of film. Oh well, I just popped a cold beer, climbed into the hot tub, and enjoyed the ride back across the channel. Just another fine day of California diving.

-- A.N.



Diver's Compass: The *Peace* (805) 984-2025; The *Spectre* (805) 483-6612 or book these and The *Liberty*, (800) 494-2836 (www.takemetoo.com, a

side business for Captain Ted of the *Spectre*), or through Ventura Dive & Sport (805) 650-6500 ... Check out the excellent comparison of 49 diveboats from San Francisco to San Diego (along with additional information on California diving) at: www.californiadiveboats.com). Boats are USCG approved with all safety equipment, DAN O2, GPS,

Great Whites Visit Catalina

The horrifying image won't go away. Bill McNair sees it at night in his sleep: a great white shark charging from the

depths, its mouth agape, threatening to bite him in half.

"As soon as I go to sleep, I see that mouth," the Huntington Beach podiatrist said. "And then I wake up. I slept maybe 10 hours total in the first week since it happened."

The nightmares were spawned on the morning of June 10 when McNair, 52, was spearfishing in 70 feet of water on the unpopulated windward side of Santa Catalina Island, 26 miles from Los Angeles. He dived to 15 feet and took aim at a small yellowtail when he saw the shark, an estimated 10-footer with a girth of nearly four feet, rising through the wavering haze.

McNair said he remembers vividly seeing first a patch of gray, then two large eyes, "their black pupils focusing right on me," and then a mouth "with row after row of crooked teeth ... and this face coming up at me with the speed of a freight train."

He aimed his powerful gun in the direction of the shark, pulled the trigger. He dropped his weapon and kicked frantically to the surface, glancing over his shoulder once and seeing a silhouette of the predator — turned sideways, with half of a 6-foot spear protruding from its snout.

"His heart was ready to jump out of his chest," said his diving partner, Lyle Miller of Seal Beach, who plucked McNair to safety aboard McNair's 38-foot boat. Miller did not see the shark and neither reported the incident to island officials.

While authorities say they believe there is no reason for public alarm, McNair and Miller — veteran breath-hold, or "freedivers" — expressed concern about what they perceive to be an increasingly visible presence of white sharks around Catalina's shores. It was McNair's second sighting of a great white in two years.

Reports of other sightings have been swirling around the island and throughout the diving community for months. For example, the wife of a freediver allegedly saw a large white shark circling their vessel in the Parsons Landing area near the isthmus as her husband swam back to their boat. She waved her husband off, and he made it safely to shore.

Shark experts declined to speculate as to whether Catalina is being visited by more white sharks than in years past. "White sharks have been residents there seasonally throughout history, long before Wrigley even arrived," said John McCosker, a marine biologist at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. "They visit all the offshore islands."

Pete Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 2001.

and complete navigational and communication gear. Three to four dives a day cost between \$63 and \$80 depending on itinerary. Verify the specific costs of your itinerary when booking. Open-boat trips may contain a broad mix of students, hunters, photographers, etc. Currents and surge can be significant and Channel Island trips are usually intermediate to advanced diving. C-cards were checked and computer diving was encouraged ... Experienced divers were allowed to dive their own profiles and solo diving was discretely allowed.

When A Travel Agent Sticks To “Its Rules”

“standard” business practice is lousy business practice

You're one week away from a dream dive trip when you learn your flight's been canceled due to a political uprising at the other end. Then you find out you can't even get all your money back. Sounds like a nightmare ... but nightmares, like dreams, can come true. Just ask *Undercurrent* reader Tony Moats of Boulder, Colorado.

Last spring Moats booked a diving/kayaking trip to the Solomon Islands through Great Expeditions, a Longmont Colorado dive agency. Moats' dive buddy, Alexander, had just charged nearly \$5,200 on his credit card for the two, when Air Pacific canceled its flight to Fiji, as well as the connection to the Solomon Islands. You see, violence had closed both airports.

At that point, Moats began negotiating with Great Expeditions owner Marjanna Helwig for a refund, though Alexander had signed a booking form containing a disclosure that read, "Once reservations are paid in full, entire package is NON-REFUNDABLE."

Negotiations dragged on while Helwig attempted to recoup the money she'd forwarded to various suppliers. Several months later, after being fully reimbursed herself, Helwig wrote

to Moats and Alexander: "Despite our written policy that all services are non-refundable once paid in full, under the circumstances we were able to credit back the majority of your trip costs. Per our policy a 20 percent fee has been retained. I regret I am unable to offer a 100 percent refund for the unfortunate circumstances that caused your cancellation. However, Great Expeditions cannot be financially responsible for whatever circumstances that may cause a loss of service for travelers." The 80 percent refund was processed directly to Alexander's credit card.

Moats felt 20 percent was excessive, but when he complained, Helwig explained that this was a standard practice to cover out-of-pocket costs such as credit card overhead and staff time spent planning the custom itinerary. Even so, nowhere was it written in Great Expeditions' material. She did suggest that if Moats were to book another trip with Great Expeditions, she'd be willing to apply half the withheld money to the new booking.

Scheduling problems and a generally deteriorating relationship led Moats to look elsewhere when booking his next trip. But he didn't stop asking questions, such as: "What IS 'standard

industry practice' regarding refunds in such cases?"

Reader Ken Hares of San Jose has raised similar concerns following his experience with International Diving Expeditions of Murietta, CA. After booking a trip to the Malaysia Underwater Photo and Video Contest through IDE in 1999, he was so delighted with his visit to Sipadan and Mabul, that he, his wife and two friends put down deposits for the September 2000 competition as well. Then, after the kidnaping at Sipadan that April, he read State Department advisories warning Americans not to travel there in large groups. He asked IDE if the Malaysian government could ensure the group's safety by providing a military presence during the event, and when no assurance came, he canceled his reservations in May 2000.

IDE owner Nadav Joshua pointed out his company's cancellation fee policy: If a booking is canceled between 90 and 180 days before departure, the fee is one-third of the entire trip price (NOT the deposit amount). Hares and his party of four had each put down deposits of \$500, or 15 percent of the \$3,000 trip price, so their entire deposit was forfeited. Joshua tells us he did offer to refund the entire deposit if Hares were to re-book the same trip the following year, and 50